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ABSTRACT

This fact sheet examines age differences in children's reactions to parental divorce, in-school reactions, and the school role in helping these children cope. The school counselor's role is examined in working with school administrators, teachers, parents, and children. Individual and group counseling with children are discussed. Ten suggestions are given for school personnel who work with children of divorce. Ten resource documents are listed. (NB)

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HIGHLIGHTS

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Helping Children Cope With Divorce: The School Counselor's Role

The U.S. Census bureau estimates that approximately 50 percent of all American children born in 1982 will live in a single-parent home sometime during their first 18 years, mostly as a result of separation or divorce. Schools can represent one stable force in their lives during the family transition, and school personnel can help them cope with the effects of divorce.

Age Differences

Research examining children's mechanisms for coping with divorce has shown that children's reactions depend on their age and developmental stage at the time the divorce occurs. (Cantrell, 1986; Freeman & Couchman, 1985; Kieffer, 1982; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

Early Latency (ages 5-8). Children between the ages of five and eight at the time of their parents' divorce tend to react with great sadness. Some may feel fearful, insecure, helpless, and abandoned by the missing parent. Younger children often express guilt and blame themselves for their parents' divorce.

Late Latency (ages 9-12). Children in late latency at the time of their parents' divorce are distinguished from younger children by their feelings of intense anger. Nine- to 12-year-olds may still feel loneliness, loss, shock, surprise, and fear, but anger and possibly the rejection of one parent are the predominant reactions of this age group.

Adolescence (ages 13-18). Adolescents whose parents are divorcing also experience loss, sadness, anger, and pain. A typical adolescent reaction to parental divorce, however, often involves acting-out behaviors. Sexual promiscuity, delinquency, the use of alcohol and drugs, and aggressive behavior have all been identified as adolescent reactions to parental divorce.

In-School Reactions

In Wallerstein and Kelly's (1980) five-year longitudinal study of 60 families and 131 children of divorce, teachers reported that two-thirds of the children showed changes in school behavior and/or academic performance following the parental separation. Cantrell (1986) concurs that teachers frequently report observing changes in academic achievement, moods, attendance patterns, and behavior of children adjusting to their parents' divorce.

School Role

The school is in an excellent position for offering supportive services to children of divorce (Kieffer, 1982). Children spend much time in school, where the continuity and routine can offer a safe environment for interventions. Counselors, teachers, and other school personnel are

available on a daily basis and can provide help that avoids both the stigma and the expense associated with seeking help from private practitioners. Finally, the number of children in the school provides the possibility for group interventions.

School Counselor's Role

The school counselor can provide valuable assistance directly through counseling with the children and indirectly through services to school administrators, teachers, and parents. Scherman and Lepak (1986) suggest that counselors not view divorce as a single problem with negative consequences, but focus on changes caused by divorce (e.g., single-parent homes, changes in routines and life styles, visitation patterns with relatives) and their positive, negative, or neutral effects on the children.

Working with School Administrators. Drake (1981) identified 10 major issues facing administrators with regard to children of divorce: school territorial rights, parental access to school records, release of the child from school, school visits, medical emergencies, financial responsibility, the child's surname, retention, confidentiality of records, and parental access to school functions. Counselors can consult with school administrators on these policy issues and help them to understand the legal implications of divorce for the school.

Because kidnapping of a child by the noncustodial parent may be a concern, schools need to guard against the possibility of parental kidnapping. Burns and Brassard (1982) suggest that schools:

1. Ask parents to inform the school about custody concerns.
2. Require parents to show legal documentation of sole custody when they report a sole custody arrangement.
3. Ensure that teachers are aware of custody status.
4. Maintain an office list of children and custodial parents.

Working with Teachers. School counselors can help teachers and other school personnel by conducting inservices on the effects of divorce on children and their classroom behavior. Counselors can also help to sensitize teachers to the transition a child is experiencing and to the implications of that transition. Teachers may need to change their choice of words, or to adapt their curriculum and classroom resource materials to include various family types.

Working with Parents. Counselors can make parents aware of the special needs of their child during the divorce transition. A study by Hammond (1979) of third- to sixth-graders, for example, revealed that 74 percent of the 82

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children who were from separated or divorced families believed that school counselors could help by talking with parents of children who asked the counselor to do so. Counselors can also assist parents by referring them to divorce support groups in the community, by recommending reading materials that deal with families of divorce, and by suggesting ways that parents can help their children adjust to divorce.

Working with Children. Intervention strategies with children will depend on each child's individual needs. Kieffer (1982) suggests an adaptation of Kelly and Wallerstein's (1977) Divorce Specific Assessment which involves determining the child's developmental achievements, interviewing the child about his/her response to the family situation, and evaluating the child's existing support systems.

Hammond's (1979) study found that over 86 percent of third- to sixth-graders interviewed thought that counselors could best help children whose parents are divorcing by encouraging the children to talk about their feelings. Approximately the same percentage reported that counselors could also help by providing children with books to read about divorce.

Individual Counseling. Although there exists little research testing the efficacy of individual counseling with children of divorce, clinicians report a desirable change in the child's affect as a result of individual counseling. Individual counseling is usually reserved for children with long-term, unproductive coping behaviors and for children who cannot work well in groups.

Group Counseling. Robson (1982) reports that children's groups on divorce, led by elementary school counselors with specific strategies to meet the needs of these children, have been extremely successful. Divorce groups are a popular choice for counselors because of their cost effectiveness and multiple benefits. Eighty-two percent of the students in Hammond's (1979) study reported that a group counseling situation for children would be beneficial.

Cantrell (1986) suggests that counselors using group counseling with children of divorce deal with the developmental responses of the children while helping them to label and understand their feelings, realize that others are having similar feelings and experiences, understand the divorce process, learn new coping skills, and feel good about themselves and their parents.

Several types of group counseling are available which could be beneficial to children of divorce:

1. Situational/transitional groups offer emotional support; catharsis; and information sharing about stress, mutual feelings, and similar experiences.
2. Structured groups can teach children how to deal with crisis situations through group discussions, role playing, and the use of drawings and collages.
3. One-day workshops for children between the ages of 10 and 17 can use sentence completion exercises, assertiveness training, and films about divorce to help group members explore values and assumptions about marriage and divorce, learn to express and cope with their own and their parents' feelings, and develop communication skills for handling difficult situations.

Conclusion

In summary, school personnel can offer support for children of divorce and for their divorcing parents. Freeman and Couchman (1985) conclude that counselors and teachers working with children of divorce can be most effective when they:

1. Provide opportunities for students to discuss their feelings.
2. Allow children privacy when needed.
3. Recommend and encourage the use of age-appropriate resource materials.
4. Provide a stable environment.
5. Maintain consistent expectations and routines.
6. Engage in supportive communication.
7. Inform parents about child's progress or difficulties.
8. Encourage parents to be honest, direct, supportive, and firm with their children.
9. Be aware of language which may be offensive to children of divorce.
10. Plan and label events for parents, rather than specifically for mothers or fathers.

Resource Documents

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